The Fourth Church Pulpit

IS NOT THIS THE CARPENTER?

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
First Lesson Genesis 15:1-6, 12-16
Second Lesson Mark 6:1-6

"Where did this man get all this? ... Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?"
-Mark 6:2-3 (NRSV)

Parker Palmer, distinguished scholar, educator, author and lecturer, was our guest last weekend. He preached the sermon on Sunday and led a Lenten retreat for 150 members and friends of Fourth Church. I heard him tell a story at the retreat that I liked so much that I asked him, at dinner, to tell it again to make sure I had it right.

Palmer, who is a Ph.D. sociologist and taught for a while at Georgetown, dropped out of the academic mainstream and became Dean at an innovative Quaker learning center at Pendle Hill, near Philadelphia. Pendle Hill does wonderful things to help people learn at important and critical times in their lives. But it isn't a traditional college. It doesn't give grades and it doesn't grant degrees. It is innovative and different. After Pendle Hill, Palmer moved to Madison, Wisconsin where he earns a living as a consultant, writing books and conducting workshops and retreats like he did for us last week.

His mother, in her 80s, lives on the North Shore and has a wonderfully maternal worry these days. She can't quite understand what her son's job is. When he visits her she asks, "tell me again what you do." And Parker explains that he visits churches and universities and corporations and conducts workshops. "I see," she said recently; "you talk to them and they pay you for it?" "That's right, mother." "Well," she said, "Parker, I like it when you talk to me, but I certainly wouldn't pay you to do it."

It is a word each of us hears along the way, perhaps many times during our journey. It is not particularly an unkind word. It is a familiar word, and when it, or something like it, is said to us by our parents, spouses, dear friends, or children, it has a way of puncturing any pomposity we may have developed and restoring balance and perspective to our lives. Someone recently flew me to another city to deliver a lecture on Theology and Art. When one of mine asked me where I was headed and why, the reaction was a dry, straight, "You don't know anything about that, do you?" It can be a helpful word, actually. But if we hear it enough, from the wrong people, and if we allow it to have authority for us, it can be a hurtful and detrimental word. "You can't do that; after all, you are just you" becomes, in time, "I can't do that. I don't have the skill, the time, the strength, the education, the intelligence, the creativity. I'm just me." Or, "those people can't do it: they're lazy, they're genetically coded to fall lower on the bell curve, they're dumb, lethargic." And after several centuries of the dominant culture saying that word, those to whom and about whom it is addressed begin to believe it, and accommodate it, and act it out.

"... is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary ... ?"

It was what they said about Jesus one day. Nazareth was his home. It was not a big city — a small town, perhaps several hundred or a thousand people. They were his neighbors, his parents, friends, maybe even his aunts, uncles and cousins. They knew him as only hometown folk know their own sons and daughters. They had watched him as he grew through childhood: watched him playing in the streets, learning to read at synagogue, watched him apprentice in his father's trade, watched as he walked with friends to the big Roman city of Sepphoris, 40,000 people, just four miles from Nazareth, perhaps to see the Greek dramas performed at the theater the Romans had constructed; watched as he became spiritually restless, a young adult now, taking his turn as a reader in the synagogue, and then they had watched as he became fascinated with a strange preacher — his cousin actually — called John the Baptist. He had agreed to be baptized one day, it was whispered around Nazareth; had walked right into the Jordan River and allowed his cousin to pour water over his head. And then he had disappeared. No one had seen or heard from him since.

Now he had come home. Some said he had been in the desert, alone, fasting. He had been preaching, proclaiming the coming of God's Kingdom, like John, others said. Some were even saying that he had healed the sick and made the lame walk and the blind see. And so there was more than a little curiosity about him. People were watching when he came home.

On the Sabbath he did what every Jewish male did — he went to synagogue. It was small, intimate, everybody knew everybody else. They took turns reading from the Torah, or the prophets, and the reader would say a few words of interpretation or commentary. And so on this occasion of his return to Nazareth after his mysterious absence, Jesus read and spoke on the Sabbath in the synagogue. Luke tells us that he read from the prophet Isaiah, a wonderfully heroic passage about the coming day of the Lord when the poor would hear good news for a change, the captives would be released, the blind would see. And then he said, "Today, this is happening, this scripture is fulfilled."

It was all a bit much for his neighbors, and friends, and relatives. And their initial curiosity and admiration took a decidedly negative turn. "'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary ...?' And they took offense at him."

"Familiarity breeds contempt," my mother was always telling me whenever she thought I was becoming presumptuous, assuming too much about my relationships with others, adults, the elderly, calling them by their given names for instance. She didn't like it when clerks called her "sweetie" or "honey" or, worse yet, used her name which was a privilege she would give when she thought it appropriate. In a restaurant this week, the waitress — who gave a whole new definition to the adjective "perky" — brought the bill to the table of four women beside us and said to the one with a credit card — a distinguished looking woman I guessed to be in her 70s — "just be a darlin' and sign the top copy, Gladys." Gladys was not amused and said "young woman, you don't know me well enough to call me Gladys." Whereupon Joy, the waitress who not only had her name on her identification tag but signed each bill with a smiley face, announced to Gladys and to all of us "Well, excuse me, I was just being friendly." And my mother was smiling and nodding her approval.

Familiarity does breed contempt. But sometimes familiarity can miss the point, can be badly, disastrously blind sometimes. The good people of Nazareth didn't get it. All they could see was Mary's boy, the carpenter's.

The primal Bible story — God's call to Abraham and Sarah, God's promise to give them an heir in their old age — is the story of two people trying to believe and be faithful in a very ordinary human situation. They doubt the promise, they argue with God, they try to get out of the responsibility of being God's chosen people ... but God keeps after them, not in any of the dramatic ways people expect and want God to act. The typical encounter with God that calls faith out of people in the Bible is fairly ordinary. God doesn't go in for flashy displays or even elegant philosophic theses. God chooses to encounter people in the ordinary: an old couple on the edge of history; in a band of unlikely wandering tribes; in of all things, Mary's boy, the carpenter, Jesus of Nazareth.

There are several words for us in all of this.

The first is that the people of Nazareth don't recognize who Jesus is and what he is saying because to do so would mean they would have to change their world view, their expectations and their behavior. They had been waiting for the Messiah, God's Kingdom, all their lives, they and all the generations before them, and, frankly, the waiting had gotten into their blood. It wasn't so bad actually. You could blame whatever was wrong on the Romans, or on the Messiah not having shown up yet. You could pretty much live your life like your parents lived theirs and their parents before them: believing the same things, saying pretty much the same things, hating the same people. We might even say the people of Nazareth were addicted to waiting, had become co-dependent on the Messiah not having shown up, and the Kingdom of God not yet present.

In Luke's account of this incident Jesus got in a lot of trouble when he brought all that waiting into the immediate present. "Today the scripture is fulfilled," he said, not yesterday or someday; not nostalgia for the past or starry-eyed wishing for the future, but today. To believe that meant they would have to start to live differently, to start to love and give, start to forgive old enemies and lay aside the resentments and prejudices they had harbored so long. That's hard to do.

To forgive is to let go of the past and to live in a new present. It is to willfully, intentionally let go of anger and resentment and start all over with new possibilities. It is not easy to do. It is the way God's Kingdom operates and what Jesus came to give and they, not alone certainly, decided that the old way was easier, simpler.

In his book, *The Active Life,* Parker Palmer discusses, with courageous candor, his experience with depression. He writes,

> "One of my most difficult lessons involved the fact that part of me wanted to stay depressed, despite the pain and despair, because as long as I was depressed, life became easier. In my depression, no one expected much of me, and neither did I. I received more sympathy and fewer challenges. I had a legitimate reason for hiding out from the world of action and decision and responsibility." [p. 141]

Palmer is clear that much depression can and should be treated medically and chemically. But he is also candid enough to see that part of his struggle was to free himself of his dependence. Not unlike the good folk of Nazareth, addicted to their waiting.

Jesus Christ shows up and offers newness. "Today," he says. Today you are free to love and forgive and live fully.

And there is a pertinent word here for all who listen to and adopt as their own negative assessments of their own potential. "It's only Mary's son, the carpenter," they said, altogether missing the point, and also negatively impacting his own effectiveness. Did you notice that their inability to see his potential, their refusal to believe, rendered him, momentarily at least, impotent and ineffective? "He could do no deed of power there ..."

Nothing much gets accomplished unless the people responsible believe in the project, someone observed. Management theorists understand that some buying into the corporate vision, values and culture by the work force is essential to market success these days. But it is in the personal arena that this word becomes critical. It is a difficult, some would say almost impossible, task to rise above the expectations of those you trust and who are, in some way, your teachers and mentors. An excellent program administered by a friend of mine encourages and provides financial assistance to minority youngsters, to go to college. It's name is, "I Know I Can," and it's important because those youngsters have been told by the dominant culture that they can't and so there is no use hoping or expecting or trying.

As we take a long and hard look at Affirmative Action, it's a thought to keep in mind. One hundred and thirty years ago this nation still had a slave economy and slave system. That system made enormous assumptions about the African men and women who were hunted, captured, shipped, and sold: assumptions about their intelligence, their spirits, hearts and souls. The system depended on destroying whatever culture they brought into their captivity as well as their family structure and religion. Just a generation ago those same people were prevented from voting, from participating in the dominant culture's best education, social, and cultural institutions. And so the question becomes — not so much do you and I have to pay a penalty for the sins of our forbearers as — is it not in our interest and the interests of our children, not to mention the minority population itself, to try everything we can think of to raise their hopes and expectations and opportunities to at least the level we have been enjoying for centuries? I do hope we can talk about that before we turn back the clock ...

Brent Staples is a writer for the *New York Times,* an African-American,who has chronicled his own escape from the ghetto culture of West Chester, Pennsylvania in the 1950s, to earn a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago. It's in his fine book, *Parallel Time.* In last Sunday's *Times* Staples wrote a column about Affirmative Action. He was not "college material," but a professor from Widener College talked him into applying anyhow and Widener accepted him without meeting the application test minimum. He wrote:

> "When I was 17, society spotted me a few points on the SATs and changed my life. I became a writer — and a middle-class taxpayer — as many other black men went on to prisons, cemeteries, and homeless shelters. Sounds like a smart investment to me. The country would be wise to keep making it."

Abraham played the game of "Yes, but" with God, excusing himself from responsibility on account of his age and his childless state. Moses tried it too. So did the prophet, Jeremiah. "I can't do it, I'm not smart enough, strong enough, young enough, prolific enough." But God saw — sees — the capacity inside, the full potential of every man and woman. Faith is not merely believing ideas about God. Faith is trusting God's call, God's belief in us ...

So what is it that God has called you to do? What has God equipped you to do? What gifts has God given you to put to use? Have you ever believed as much in yourself, can you believe in yourself, as much as God does?

God chooses the ordinary to get the work of the Kingdom done. And the boldest affirmation of our faith is that God chooses ordinary men and women to do the work of the Kingdom and, furthermore, that the ordinary work you and I do always has within it something of God's will, God's priorities, God's potential.

The final word is a simple one. The men and women who knew him best missed the truth about him, missed the chance to be proud of him, one of their own, missed the chance to support him, and love him and follow him ... I wonder what they said when they heard the news three years later about what had happened to him when he went to Jerusalem for the Passover? Were they still saying — "Who did he think he was? He's only Jesus ..." Did they say — "we knew something like this would happen to him"? Were they still missing the point, missing God's love in the world, in their lives, because of their familiarity? It's why we observe Lent, of course, those of us who know him best: so as not to miss the truth and the urgency and immediacy in the midst of our own familiarity.

New Testament scholar Lamar Williamson says,

> "the one we meet in these stories is one we know well in the familiar patterns of corporate worship in the common disciplines of the Christian life, and in the lives of ordinary people around us." [Mark, *Interpretation*, p. 117]

So this year, as you hear the story again, entertain the very real possibility that what happened that day in Nazareth actually keeps happening, that Jesus Christ comes to each of us in the ordinary, the everyday, the familiar, and invites us to trust and to live and to love as citizens of God's Kingdom on earth.

Amen.